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# Gritz's tale of heroism fabricated

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James G. "Bo" Gritz, the former Green Beret who directed privately financed POW rescue missions into Laos, fabricated his part in a heroic mission in Vietnam where he claimed a fellow soldier took his life so his comrades might live.

In his travels to drum up support for the POW-MIA cause, Gritz has told the inspirational story to get public support for his missions, which are financed privately and have aroused enormous controversy.

The trouble with Gritz's story, according to Army records and eyewitnesses, is that the soldier mentioned did not commit suicide, the battle did not take place where and when he claimed and, finally, Gritz wasn't even there.

Now, Gritz admits the story is a "composite," and also says he wasn't on the mission.

Gritz gained fame earlier this year when news reports disclosed that the 44-year-old retired lieutenant colonel in the Green Berets had led a privately financed raid into Laos last November to rescue any Americans still being held there.

And, last week, Gritz told a House subcommittee that he had led two more forays into Laos earlier this

year in search of living American servicemen held since the Vietnam era.

But Gritz told the subcommittee he could not provide "hard evidence" that the men still were being held, although he was convinced through his Laotian intelligence sources that the Americans were still there.

At issue was Gritz's credibility, as he claimed to be sure that Americans still were being held there, and officials from several U.S. intelligence agencies said Gritz could not have hard proof the men still were being held.

The congressional session aroused the curiosity of another ex-soldier, former special forces sergeant Charles F. Hiner, now 47, of Fayetteville, N.C.

Hiner attended the hearing with the intention to confront Gritz over a speech Gritz made on May 29, 1981, before a Vietnam veterans lunch in Buffalo, N.Y.

In that speech, Gritz told a graphic tale of how a special forces sergeant named "Hoagland" took his

own life in a December 1965 battle in the Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam.

Gritz told his audience, "As happened all too often, we landed right in the middle of the lion's den. While fleeing to the pickup zone, SFC Hoagland was hit by one of many machinegun bursts that cracked by our ears."

publication, Gritz continued:

"It was as if we were all hit when Hoagland went down, his legs shattered. There wasn't a moment's hesitation. We all crashed back through the heavy jungle to encircle our comrade. Hoagland was frantic, not from pain or fear, but because he knew, as we did, that to stay meant certain death or capture."

Gritz then said, "Even as we stacked magazines and straightened pins on our remaining hand grenades, bullets began cutting bark and vines all around us.

Still, we could hear Hoagland screaming, 'Get the hell out of here, now!'"

Gritz then told his audience that the men "couldn't bear to leave Hoagland to die alone."

But, Gritz said, "Hoagland's unspoken devotion and love for his buddies was stronger than life itself. With a whispered goodbye and a last look at his friends, Hoagland put his AR-15 to his head and, before any of us could react, pulled the trigger, eliminating in a twitch of a finger the need for all of us to be there. He had not died alone and yet we had a chance at life."

That is not the way Hiner remembers the action, where he got a head wound.

He furnished The Washington Times with official Army records that showed the battle where Sgt. George C. Hoagland died was held on Jan. 29, 1966, instead of in December 1965, as Gritz claimed.

The records also showed that the battle was at a different location, and they listed 17 Americans fighting there.

Gritz isn't among them.

In an interview, Hiner said, "I can state for a fact that Gritz wasn't there. I was, and I got a head wound."

And, Hiner charged, it would have been difficult for Hoagland to have taken his own life since he was "literally blown away...he was killed instantly."

Hiner described Hoagland as having one of his arms severed from his body and the other hanging by a thread.

Hiner said he heard about Gritz's speech on the "old boy network" among former special forces men and decided to come here to hear Gritz testify.

He almost confronted Gritz in the halls of the Cannon House Office Building after Gritz's testimony but did not because "I was so mad, I was afraid I would make a scene."

Hiner's story is backed up by Charles Beckwith, who has retired from the Army as colonel, and who led the 1980 raid into Iran that former President Jimmy Carter ordered in an attempt to free the American hostages there.